

Christian School Management

The Servant Leader Principle

“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”



Christian Management / Leadership: The Servant Leader Principle

John 13: 3-4, 12

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ... When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.

Christian school leaders are servant leaders. They have the following obligations:

- Serve the mission of the school – everything else is a subset of this.
- Serve the children of the school as the primary client.
- Recruit and support faculty and staff to
 - Provide resources.
 - Be present for them and know each one.
 - Be in an ongoing conversation with them.
 - Help them grow throughout their careers.
 - Hold them accountable.
 - Let them go when they are unable to fulfill their task with excellence.
- Partner with the Board for effective planning.
- Execute with diligence and efficiency.

Authority and service seem to always be in tension. If I am in authority, how can I at the same time be in service? As the Head of School or Division Leader or Business Manager, where is authority and where is service? How do they link?

Authority is not to be denied. It is there for three important purposes: to know and do a job in such a way that people follow; to hold others accountable; to bring a key perspective to conversations and thus enrich decision-making. Each of these purposes is part of leadership.

To be obvious, you can't be a leader unless you have followers. Gaining followers happens in a variety of ways as history shows: the 'strong' man (and occasionally woman), the mystic, the rich person, the visionary, the person of power, and so on. Most of these are not servant leaders. It is important to know that – servant leadership is only one of many ways to lead. We consider it to be the highest form of leadership.

In a school, servant leadership operates at every level. The teacher needs to lead children from being subordinates to becoming followers as quickly as possible and does that through relationship building, demonstrating competence, teaching with passion, and having an expansive vision of where each child can go. The administrator optimally serves followers who are similarly committed to the mission of the school, supported in their growing competence, trusting of the leader, held accountable, and contributing to the whole as members of a productive team. The Head serves the team by optimizing and expanding its strengths. Gallup found that the four needs of followers were: trust, compassion, stability, hope. In the Christian school, these words have resonance as well. Still, we might rewrite them in this form:

Gallup	Christian School
Trust	Competence and making and keeping promises
Compassion	Love – desiring always the best for the other
Stability	Knowing that Jesus is the Rock and standing securely there
Hope	Mission, planning, execution

Leadership does not always operate according to the organization chart. Formal leadership is often supported by informal leadership in the organization – the exemplary teacher who leads conversations, presents at conferences, and chairs committees has an authority far beyond her title. Informal leadership is the place where we discover those who have the servant’s heart. While we may hire those who already have titles and / or reputations, we see in the everyday interactions of each person much more clearly what their impulse to action is – whether to power or to service.

Robert Greenleaf wrote: “The servant-leader is servant first ... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions ... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?”

This leads to the key observation that for the Christian school, servant leadership has an objective that is clear and non-negotiable. At the heart of the word service is the person of the child. We are not in our schools to serve everyone equally. Far from it. First is the child who is the reason for the school, its mission outcome, and the most vulnerable person in the school community. Servant leadership is thus not even-handed. Within the context of the school, each servant leader serves first the student. Both the adult leader and the adult follower must know that their contract obligation to fulfill their responsibilities in return for various benefits is the legal mirror for their moral obligation to deliver the mission to the student.

The practical issues that arise are difficult in practice, while clear in theory. What happens if adults do not do their jobs well? How do we hold adults accountable for that mission delivery irrespective of whether that is in the business office, the classroom, the playing fields, the field trips or the advancement office? What about that beloved member of the church community who happens to be a mediocre teacher or administrator? Does servant leadership imply that we place adult community as the prime concern? Is rocking the boat being a servant? Should we overlook adult misconduct because we genuinely do care for every member of the school?

This would suggest that “servant” is a soft term that has no substance. To the contrary – when we recognize that the center of our attention is the child, to serve the child implies that we are all accountable in the most demanding ways both personally and collectively. In that collective sense, it is the school that takes on the responsibility for mission delivery to each child and thus the school that

must corporately take on the characteristic of servant leader to fully develop each child's God-given gifts and fulfill God's purpose in each child's life. Adults thus operate in two ways. The first is as an individual where the servant leader seeks to deliver the mission to the child and support, enhance, and develop the skills of each employee. The second is as a school body exhibiting corporately the servant leader disposition. Here, the requirement that each individual be a contributing element to that corporate identity is key.

If we are committed as servant leaders merely to the individual employee, it would be possible to imagine the needs of the adult becoming, as often happens in our schools, equivalent to or even greater than the needs of the child. Where, however, we are committed as servant leader institutionally to the child, now each adult has a critical role to play and to be held accountable. Being a servant leader is thus not just an individual but a corporate responsibility. 1 Corinthians 12 is implacable that we all play a part in the body of Christ and, implicitly, in whatever station of life we have been led to. "Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many" (verse 14).

The Head as servant leader primarily for the child must therefore root out adult incompetence and ensure that the child receives the best mission education. Similarly, the Board of Trustees must hold the Head accountable. Once the highest needs of the child have been taken care of, and in order to take care of the highest needs of the child, the adult is also nurtured and fed. Accountability is thus a key element of being a servant leader.

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28)

The Christian school is an exemplar of servant leadership. We give our lives as a school body to deliver the mission to the student. We are held accountable for the excellence of that delivery. I individually deliver the mission and am held individually accountable. When the Christian school functions in this healthy way, it can achieve excellence.